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AUTHOR McTeague, Frank; And Others
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ABSTRACT

A survey of student writing in every subject and grade in a Canadian secondary school involved 117 students over a nine-day period and investigated the amount of writing done in all subjects and the variety of purpose and audience in student writing. Results showed that each student produced an average of two written pieces per day, that one out of three pieces was mathematical, that the average amount of writing was some 166 words per school day, that approximately one-third of the writing was copied, that the writing was limited in variety (only 15% of the writing called for the use of reasoning or inference), and that there was a discrepancy between the writing of students and writing required in the adult environment. Suggestions for teachers and department heads to use in implementing school language policies include the need to view writing as a multistage process, to recognize that literate intelligence and scholarly cognitive abilities are developed primarily by writing, and to understand that teacher response to student writing is critical in developing writing abilities. (AEA)

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An Investigation of Secondary Student Writing Across the Curriculum and Some Suggestions for School Language Policies

REPORT

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Frank McTeague, English Co-ordinator
Ryder Payne, English Department Head
at George Harvey Secondary School
Anne Graham, B.A. Research Assistant
Jack Murray, Ph.D.
Research and Planning Consultant
January, 1980
The Board of Education for the Borough of York

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INTRODUCTION

This survey of student writing in every subject and grade in a secondary school is directly related to the implementation of the recommendations of the Language and Literacy Report (Board of Education, May 1977).

The recommendation having major consequences for our schools is that concerned with the co-operative development by each staff of a school language policy for the total curriculum.

In its revised Curriculum Guideline for Intermediate English (1978) the Ontario Ministry of Education requires all school principals "to provide the initiative" for such a policy. As a result of this provincial mandate the development of local studies and resources takes on a new urgency to assist and direct implementation.

British investigations and studies such as the Bullock Report, and related Schools Council Research Projects have established that dominant instructional patterns favour the receptive uses of language (listening and reading) to the detriment of the productive uses of language (talking and writing). Serious imbalances in the instrumental uses of the four language processes are reducing teacher effectiveness and minimizing classroom opportunities for learning by all students. The main purpose therefore in advocating a language policy across the curriculum is to correct the imbalance by enabling teachers to understand the central role of language in teaching, learning and evaluation processes.

The main purpose of this study is to investigate present practice in student writing across the curriculum by finding answers to two main questions:

1. How much writing do students do in all subjects ? Are the students assigned an adequate amount to support the development of writing abilities as well as the learning of the subjects?

2. Is the writing produced across the curriculum sufficiently varied in both purpose and audience to support the development of literacy?

METHODOLOGY

Sample and Data Collection

In order to select the students, five teachers from each grade level were chosen at random. Each of these 25 teachers were asked to select five students for the survey.

The resulting list contained the names of 125 students, (25 each from grades 9-13). Teachers were encouraged to try to find "average" students who would be likely to co-operate. As might be expected, some students volunteered more enthusiastically than others.

To facilitate photocopying, the students were divided into two shifts and each shift reported to the researcher every other day at an assigned time (usually at the beginning of a period). They were instructed to bring with them all notebooks, assignment dittoes, drafts, projects, essays, and any other writing relating to school assignments, including all rough work.

Writing was not received from all students for the entire nine day period because some students were absent, forgot about it, lost interest or produced few pieces of writing. At the conclusion of the survey, 101 students had submitted at least one piece of writing.

All the written work produced was classified and quantified according to the following system.

Quantification and Classification

The subjects taught at George Harvey Secondary School were grouped into eight categories as follows:

1.	COMMUNICATIONS:	Business Correspondence, English
2.	MODERN LANGUAGES:	French, Italian
3.	OFFICE SKILLS:	Office Practice, Shorthand, Typing, Business Machines and Applications
4.	SOCIAL SCIENCES:	Business Finance, Business Law, Business Organization, Consumer Studies, Economics, Environmental Science, Geography, History, Family Studies 40, 55, Man in Society, Man, Science and Technology, Introduction to Business, Marketing, People and Politics.
5.	SCIENCE:	Biology, Chemistry, Physical Science, Physics
6.	MATHEMATICS:	Accounting, Computer Studies, Mathematics
7.	SHOPS:	All shops e.g. auto, drafting, construction, electricity, machine, refrigeration, etc.
8.	ARTS:	Art, Bachelor Survival, Physical Education, Family Studies 10, 20, 30, Music, Screen Arts, Theatre Arts.

The year was coded according to the level of the particular subject, not by the grade level of the students' home form.

The "type" or "genre" of each piece of writing was classified as follows:

1. Answers - short answers to questions (usually daily assignments).
2. Questions - copied from teacher's dictation or blackboard or textbook.
3. Notes - either copied from the teacher's dictation or blackboard or notes taken by the student during class.

4. Reports/essays/outlines - major assignments or lab reports.

5. Charts, Diagrams - consisting of at least half a page.

6. Literary - includes drama, poetry, paragraph, short stories and other "creative" writing.

7. Shorthand.

8. Math, Numerals.

9. Modern Languages - French and Italian.

The "function" or purpose of each piece of writing was classified as:

1. Function I - information processed on a low level with limited use of reasoning or inference e.g. short answers, simple narration, listing and serialization

2. Function II - gives evidence of writer's personal responses to the information presented e.g. his emotions, attitudes, opinions and reflections

3. Function III - information processed on a high level giving evidence of sound reasoning e.g. discovering relationships, making comparisons, drawing conclusions, exploring consequences

4. Function IV - literary work, drama, short stories, poetry

Three categories were used to code the "audience" to which each piece of writing was addressed; namely

1. Self e.g. rough notes - intended only for the student's personal use "jog" notes for seminar presentation

2. Self and teacher - e.g. answers to questions, notebooks

3. Self and teacher and another - e.g. letters sent to a public institution for information for school work

No attempt was made to infer or code the function or audience for Charts/ Diagrams, Shorthand or Numerals.

All work was coded according to the student's report as to whether or not it was copied. This information was readily verified in most cases because several students from a class would have identical items.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE STUDENTS

School Status

The grade composition of the original 117 students in the sample was as follows:

TABLE I - Grade Level

Grade	%	N
9	20.5	24
10	20.5	24
11	17.9	21
12	19.7	23
13	20.5	24
No response	.9	1
	100.0%	117

TABLE II - Number of Credits

Number of credits	%	N
No credits	14.5	17
Between 1 & 7	20.5	24
Between 8 & 14	18.8	22
Between 15 & 22	26.5	31
Between 23 & 30	19.7	23
	100.0%	117

Approximately one-third of the sample had less than 64% grade average, another one-third had between 65% and 73% while the remaining one-third ranged between 74% and 85%.

The students were divided almost equally regarding technical subjects - half were taking at least one while the remainder were not taking any. Almost two-thirds of the students were taking at least one Level 5 subject.

The sample was representative of the actual population of the school which was composed of 60% boys and 40% girls.

60% of the students were born in Canada while 40% were born in other countries.

RESULTS OF THE SURVEY: SOME MAJOR FINDINGS*

Characteristics of Students' Writing

Frequencies

1,950 items of student writing were collected for the survey and coded according to the scheme described in Section 2, Methodology (see p.2).

TABLE III - Classification of items by subject

Subject	No. of Items	%
Math	556	28.5
Social Sciences	406	20.8
Science	284	14.6
Communications	278	14.3
Shops	145	7.4
Office Skills	142	7.3
Modern Languages	109	5.6
Arts	30	1.5
	1,950	100.0%

The largest number of items (more than one-quarter) was from Math. One-fifth of the items were from the Social Sciences while approximately 15% were from each Science and Communications. Shops, Office Skills, Modern Languages and Arts each accounted for less than 10% of the items. In Maths and Social Sciences students write every other day on average; in English and Science, it is every third day; in all other subjects, almost once a week.

TABLE IV - Classification of items by grade

Grade	No. of Items	%
9	454	23.3
10	534	27.4
11	218	11.2
12	434	22.3
13	309	15.8
	1,949	100.0%
No response	+ 1	
	1,950	

*A more detailed preliminary version of this report is on file at the Board Office.

More than one-quarter of the items were submitted by Grade 10 students while in both Grade 9 and 12, students submitted slightly less than one-quarter of the items. Grade 13 students submitted about 15% of the items and Grade 11 students submitted the least - approximately 10%. The proportion of Grade 11 students in the sample is somewhat less than the proportion in the other grades.

TABLE V - Proportion of Work Copied

Copied	No. of Items	%
Not copied	1,279	65.7
Copied	670	34.3
	1,949	100.0%

More than one-third of the items were copied.

TABLE VI - Proportion of Copied Work by Subject

	Communi-cations	Modern Languages	Office Skills	Social Sciences	Science	Math	Shop	Arts
Copied	22.3%	22.9%	85.2%	46.6%	40.5%	20.0%	26.9%	26.7%
Not Copied	77.7%	77.1%	14.8%	53.4%	59.5%	80.0%	73.1%	73.3%
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
(N)	(278)	(109)	(142)	(406)	(284)	(556)	(145)	(30)

The subject area containing the greatest percentage of items of copied work was Office Skills (85%), while half of the items collected from Social Science and Science were copied. About one-quarter of the work done for Shop and Arts were copied while approximately one-fifth of the items from Communications, Modern Languages and Math were copied.

TABLE VII - Mean Words per Item and per Student Day by Grade

Grade	Number of Student Days	Total Number of Verbal Items	Mean Number of Words per Item	Mean Number of Words per Student per Day
9	216	316	100	146
10	189	339	122	219
11	135	157	116	135
12	180	251	146	204
13	180	134	174	130
	900	1,197	126	166

The mean words per item increased from 100 words per item in grade 9 to 174 words per item in grade 13, with the exception of grade 11. Both the number of grade 11 students in the sample and the number of items submitted by them were proportionately less than those in the other grades. The average length for all items of student work was 126 words. The average number of words produced per day per student was 166. This amounts to half a page of typed script per day from each student and all school work.

Kinds of Writing

1. Type

TABLE VIII - Classification of items by type

Type	No. of Items	%
Answers	604	30.9
Math	600	30.8
Notes	468	24.0
Charts, Diagrams	108	5.5
Modern Languages	87	4.5
Reports, Essays	33	1.7
Shorthand	25	1.3
Questions	16	.8
Literary	9	.5
	1,950	100.0%

2. Function

Of the 1,950 items in the sample, 818 consisted of Math, Modern Languages, Shorthand, Charts and Diagrams. The remaining 1,132 items were examined to ascertain the function of the item. Almost all of the items that were coded for function were in the Function I category which consisted of low-level generalization, short answers and simple narration. The other categories are noteworthy for the absence of items that could be classified as belonging to them.

3. Audience

None of the 818 items of Math, Modern Languages etc. were coded for audience. The audience of almost all of the remaining 1,132 items was classified as Self and Teacher while a very few were for Self Only (37 items). The Self/Teacher/Other (2 items) audience was almost non-existent for the items included in this survey.

CONCLUSIONS

1. During the nine day study period, each student produced on average approximately two items per day. This finding is similar to amounts produced in all other surveys taken in Ontario. It is less than one might expect and suggests that teachers assume that students are doing far more writing than they actually are.

2. One of every three pieces of written work was mathematical and contained few words or sentences. When math items are excluded it appears that students on average are producing three pieces of writing every two days.

3. The students produced relatively short pieces of work. Almost a third of the 1,197 "word" items contained fewer than 60 words. Only one-quarter of these items exceeded 150 words in length. On average, students appear to be writing some 166 words per school day both at home and in school across all school subjects.

4. Approximately one-third of the students' writing was copied. In some subject areas, as much as 85% was copied. If the copied work is excluded from the total, the average amount per student is 60 pages of typed script for the school year.

5. Student writing is not only deficient in amount, it is also limited in variety or kind of writing. The audience for most of the writing was teacher-as-examiner. The purpose or function was either to record or to relay information. Eighty-five percent of the items consisted of short answers, mathematics, test items, short notes, definitions and simple exposition with limited use of reasoning or inference.

6. There is a discrepancy between the writing of students in secondary school and writing in the adult environment. Hand copying of written material is quite uncommon in the adult world but constitutes fully one-third of student work. Variety of function and audience is characteristic of adult writing, but most student writing is directed to the mastery of content and demonstration of such mastery for the teacher.

DISCUSSION

Although the methodology may underestimate the amounts of writing produced over a school year, the present findings do permit some tentative but useful generalizations. On average, students write a total of 166 words each day at school and at home in response to class activities and assignments in all subjects. This amounts to a total of approximately one half page of typed script. If the sample is in any way representative of a total year, then students are writing less than 100 pages per year. But about one third of the yield is copied. If we set aside copied work then the total figure for the year runs about 60 pages and for the five years of secondary schooling about 300 pages. As Prof. Donald Graves observes, writing is becoming "an endangered species" in our schools as in society. Why should this be?

From our meetings with hundreds of teachers across the province we are convinced that the status of writing in our secondary schools is related to a common notion widely held by teachers that all student writing must be personally checked or corrected by the teacher. To limit student writing to a volume a teacher can reasonably correct is to deprive students of many situational opportunities for writing and to place both the student and the learning of the subject at a serious disadvantage. To limit student writing for the sake of error-avoidance is to misunderstand the role of error in language learning. Moreover, to limit student writing to suit the teacher's time schedule is to fail to implement or take advantage of diverse editing (including peer-editing) and proof-reading techniques which must be made available to all students well before they reach secondary school and sustained throughout schooling. (See suggestions p.14.)

One third of all the work done by students in this survey was copied. Copying is a use of written language which transforms a normally productive process into a receptive process. Teachers who require of students an inordinate amount of copying are primarily transmission teachers. For them a major function of teaching is the transmission of information. In their attempts to cover heavy (perhaps unrealistic) amounts of course content, they become pre-occupied with the transmission function of teaching and lose sight of the learning or interpretative role of the student.

Copying down notes probably has a place in some instructional areas. It is up to each teacher to decide what the place of copying is in each subject and to keep copying in that place. As the use of copying increases, it displaces productive uses of language. If we contrast the processes involved in both note-taking and note-making, many teachers may be willing to promote the latter. Here is a contrastive view of the two processes:

Note-taking or Copying	⟷	Note-making or Personal Writing
is counterproductive for the following reasons:		is productive for the following reasons:
1. passive transfer of information	⟷	1. active processing of information
2. reduces development of comprehension of new information	⟷	2. extends development of comprehension of new information
3. non-diagnostic of learner's problems	⟷	3. diagnostic of learner's problems
4. uses a single variety of writing	⟷	4. encourages diversity in varieties of writing
5. incidental to learning process	⟷	5. central to learning process

It is predictable that when students make their own notes in their own words, there will be considerable variation in the results. Such variation is part of the essential feedback process from learner to teacher. On the basis of this information feedback, teachers could diagnose where the problems are - not merely the problems in the students' understanding but in the teacher's presentation of new information.

By using such information diagnostically, teachers could improve their instructional practices. Effective curriculum development is directly related to the diagnosis and remediation of the teaching process.

SUGGESTIONS FOR SCHOOL LANGUAGE POLICIES

Among the questions teachers and department heads should consider as they work towards establishing a school language policy are the following:

1) How can we increase moderately the quality and quantity of writing associated with the teaching and learning of our subject?

2) How many of our students would improve their performance in our subject if we increased moderately the writing demands made upon them and if we assisted them with note making techniques?

3) How can we meet our responsibility not only to teach the content of the course but also the varieties of writing that demonstrate the acceptable expression of the learning?

4) How can we meet our responsibility for developing positive attitudes towards our subject? Have we overlooked the potential for attitude development that writing, and writing alone, offers to students?

5) In our concern to cover the content of the course, do we feel that student writing only impedes or retards the teaching pace?

6) Do we recognize that present deficiencies in student writing may signal the need to correct present imbalances in the uses of classroom language?

7) Do we feel that if we increase even moderately the uses of student writing, we could never mark, check or correct all the errors?

8) Do we recognize that present levels of student proficiency in writing can be improved by the co-operative effort involved in establishing a school language policy?

Briefly stated, here are a few writing principles for teachers to consider as they work towards a writing policy for the total program:

1) Writing, like talking, involves a merging of content and form. *Good writing (and talking) results more from a good grasp of the content-subject or topic - than from an undue concern with form.* Students write more with information than with wordings. The better the information base, the easier the writing process and the better the product.

2) *Writing is a multi-staged process.* Except in rare cases, it cannot appear instantaneously as a clear, accurate and precise product on the page. Usually good writing is a result of i) pre-writing activities, ii) writing and iii) post-writing activities.

   i) Pre-Writing Activities - include the teacher's planning, presentation, demonstration or the provision of some experience involving student participation, discussion and response. Whether students work in pairs or in small groups, talking through the topic or assignment even for a few minutes will produce superior results. The students talk to clarify the question, to exchange, gather and sort out information or develop main points. Avoiding such in-class interaction short circuits the learning process and the development of writing abilities.

   ii) Writing Activities include such work as rough drafts, outlining some main points, setting down some units of thought, making false starts, making changes, adding on, re-drafting etc. These may be undertaken collaboratively by the students working in pairs.

   iii) Post-Writing Activities include such work as revising, deleting, changing the sequence, re-organizing, editing and finally proof-reading for correctness. Final draft or copy then is a result of much preliminary work which should be central to normal classroom interaction.

Another model of the writing process was presented to teachers and principals in the Borough of York by Prof. Anthony Adams, Cambridge University. It is included here for purposes of clarification and amplification.

1. Motivate the writing connected with or arising from learning experience.
2. Talk and Listen - Group discussion of task or topic.
3. Reflect - Frame the questions to be answered.
4. Make preliminary notes.
5. Draft - revise and re-work.
6. Edit - revise and re-work.
7. Write - second composing.
8. Proofread - surface accuracy and usage conventions.
9. Final copy.

3) *Writing contributes to the development of each person as a student in a way no other school activity can.* By having students write frequently to meet some instructional purpose, even in making their own notes, outlines or summaries, the teacher impels a set of sub-skills essential to literacy growth. The more these sub-skills are exercised the more readily they are put at the service of the student. If, on the other hand, a student is expected to write only to demonstrate that he has retained information, as in test and exam situations, then the student is severely disadvantaged by such instructional and evaluative procedures.

4) *Literate intelligence and scholarly cognitive abilities are developed primarily by writing.* As a student writes in response to a learning experience in the classroom or a well-planned assignment, he makes comparisons, inferences, deductions; he discovers relationships, ponders and reflects about the organization of information, for purposes of consolidation. Writing is an important means of knowing.

5) *Teacher response to student writing is critical to development of writing abilities.* If the student perceives the teacher as being genuinely committed to help and support his efforts, however faltering, then a bond of trust will develop between the pupil and the teacher. Where the trust is not perceived by student, then he is immediately placed at a disadvantage. For him writing will involve more risk-taking than it should. When anyone writes, he declares himself in a way not experienced in any other communicative act or classroom activity. For students lacking self-confidence, or for students whose self-concept has been diminished or neglected by previous instruction, the task of writing is an agonizing ordeal. He knows that what appears on the page is a poor reflection of his personal linguistic worth. As Prof. Graves states "Inane and apathetic writing is often the writer's only means of self-protection." No wonder then so much of it abounds.

The student's perception of the teacher as a trusting, supporting adult contributes far more to progress in writing ability than all the exercises in composition books.

6) *Students come to discover their own ability to write in diverse ways or situations.* For some it may happen in the shop or science lab, for others it may come from an assignment in math or history. Usually it comes from a task which engages the whole person and permits him to demonstrate or to discover his own ability.

7) *Writing contributes to reading skill and comprehension abilities.* By making 'a text' the writer gains insights into how a text works to organize information, to communicate meaning, to reduce ambiguity, to confirm the reader's predictions. Revising, editing and re-drafting for clarity, economy and thoroughness are directly related to the development of higher-order reading abilities such as inference, deduction, analogy, exemplification and finally interpretation.

8) *Writing modifies and controls the instructional pace.* The urgent desire of some teachers to "cover the course" may leave slower students floundering in confusion. By adapting instructional patterns to accommodate frequent in-class writing the teacher checks the course-covering pace. As students write in response to the learning experience, teachers make time available to themselves to 'conference with' the students who most need individual help. In providing slower students with support and individual attention, the main task of the teacher as Prof. Graves indicates, is "to help students know what they know" and build from there.

9) In consulting with teachers on problems students experience and errors they frequently make, we find there are generally two main teacher attitudes towards student writing: a negative one and a developmental one. Although we have no data to support which attitude dominates the staff in any one school, we have enough experience in listening to teacher observations to justify the claim that many teachers share a negative perception of student writing judging it almost entirely upon the glaring surface errors. *Too often, most teachers respond primarily to what is wrong with a given piece rather than supporting and encouraging what is right with the student's effort.*

Professor Adams observes that most of the teacher's comments constitute a Growling, HiSSING and Spitting from the margin (Gr for grammar, SS for sentence structure and Sp for spelling). Generally, Adams points out, the teachers' comments on a piece of writing function as a release of teacher frustration, relate primarily to error and serve no purpose in helping the student to improve his next performance. Can we not find opportunities to use such comments as Great, SucceSSful or Splendid as we do in other areas of performance?

In recognizing the potential for language development latent in the course, the subject teacher will see that the main task or responsibility is to help students use the language they already have to learn the course. We thereby stretch, enrich and develop that ability so that at the conclusion of the course the student has not only learned new information but has developed language abilities to express the learning by organizing it in styles appropriate to each subject.

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